



# Draper Notes

August 25, 2015

## **Editorial: No End Runs on Class Size Limits**

The Tampa Bay Times  
Monday, August 24, 2015 5:56pm

Love them or hate them, the class size limits that Florida voters approved more than a decade ago are the law. Yet the Pinellas County School District has been using an unorthodox approach for meeting the limits that appears to violate at least the spirit of the voters' intent. The state has been quietly investigating the district for months, and it should insist with a new school year starting that Pinellas fully comply with the law and not work around it in ways that are not in the best interests of students.

The *Tampa Bay Times* reported last week that the Department of Education is investigating Pinellas for its use of substitutes in co-teaching roles to meet class size limits. Last October, district officials sent an urgent e-mail to prospective substitutes offering them co-teaching jobs from Oct. 6 to Oct. 31. One district memo said the substitutes would not be required to perform basic teaching duties or any tasks after the school day. The district also indicated that interviews were not required and that substitutes would be free to leave in November, after the state completed its fall head count. State law does not prohibit the use of substitutes as co-teachers or larger class sizes. But each co-teacher must be "responsible for planning, delivering and evaluating instruction for all students in the class."

In 2014, Pinellas hired 119 substitutes in co-teaching roles. Officials have long insisted that they did nothing wrong. The district told the *Times* that initial marketing materials miscast the role of substitutes who would work as co-teachers. In later writings, the district said substitutes would share instructional responsibilities and other duties ranging from planning to grading. There was still no requirement to participate in after-school activities such as open houses. In December, state education officials began reviewing the district's policy. The examination came to light last week in a report sent by state education officials to Gov. Rick Scott.

In 2002, voters approved an amendment to the Florida Constitution that sought to reduce ballooning class sizes. Voters set student-teacher ratios at 18 for kindergarten through third grade, 22 in fourth through eighth grades and 25 in high school. The requirement, while in many ways arbitrary and shortsighted, remains the law and districts must comply with it.

The Legislature has given struggling districts some wiggle room, allowing in 2011 for districts to add three to five students to classes without falling out of compliance. The flexibility is supposed to accommodate students who enroll later in the school year. But the law never intended for districts to manipulate it by putting students in large classes with a trained, fully responsible and engaged teacher and a substitute, who is essentially a babysitter with no formal teaching responsibilities.

Complying with the class size amendment is a challenge for many school districts as explosive growth in some areas has outpaced classroom space. It appears that Pinellas may have tried to skirt the rules by using substitutes as co-teachers without requiring them to meet the clearly defined expectations of the job. The district denies this charge, making a full and fair investigation by the Department of Education imperative to sort out the issue. More is at stake than preventing the flouting of state law. Providing a quality education for children remains the ultimate goal, which should never be compromised so that school districts can make the numbers.